

Pat Conover: From Covert Despair to Salvation

Sermon for Seekers Church

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Pat Conover

Text: [1st Corinthians 9:24-26a](#)

From Covert Despair to Salvation

Don't you know that when runners run a race, they compete to win. Run in such a way that you may win. Athletes exercise self-control to win a perishable wreath. You can win an imperishable wreath. So I do not run aimlessly.

I am running fast these days, as fast as these 62-year-old legs can run. I am not noticing many perishable wreaths around, so I am kind of hoping an imperishable one will show up.

Some of you know that I am the Legislative Director for the United Church of Christ. I serve the 6000 congregations of the United Church of Christ and the 6000 members of our Justice and Peace Action Network by working with about 20 national staff who are doing significant justice work to provide education and advocacy resources. I spend time on the hill as a direct advocate and spend a lot of time in meetings with a mix of coalitions. I do a lot of consulting on strategy and tactics. I do a lot of writing and editing, do a lot of resource sharing and connecting, a fair amount of mentoring, and I pay a lot of attention to spirit concerns.

Many good things are happening. The justice work of the UCC is noticeably strengthening after a long decline during institutional restructuring. The Washington Office is significantly stronger and we have more financial resources to work with, and it is fun to have Carolyn Shields with us for a while.

A few other things are keeping me busy too, like teaching a class in the School of Christian Living on Christian Paths to Peace, preparing for this sermon, a lively mission group and some committee work. Oh yes, and I am operating a small business out of my home to sell my book. Sales are coming along and I am starting to get some nice reviews, but it all takes time.

If I were just running for the joy of running, as I ride my bike for the joy of riding, life would look good to me. However, I am running to win. The United States, land that I love, is about to kill a lot more people in my name and yours. The escalation in Iraq is already underway. The president is going for another huge tax cut for the wealthy and attacking programs that serve low-income and marginal people. Maybe we will stop the attack on Medicare for the moment, but that gives little cause for cheering when the attacks on other programs are so relentless, like the block granting and cutting of Medicaid.

To tell you the truth, I am flat out outraged about a whole lot of things. This last week the House voted for the president's plan to increase the work burden on single mothers with small children, while reducing the programs that will help them overcome their barriers to employment, or to get the education and training they need to gain regular employment that can be a path out of poverty. I do not feel good about legal immigrants who pay a lot of taxes, do a lot of the least appreciated work in this country and were blocked from receiving Medicaid in 1996. I do not feel good about rural housing programs being cut. I do not feel good that judges

with terrible records on human and civil rights are being advanced in the court system. I do not feel good about the president and John Ashcroft taking us back to the bad old days of using the CIA, and the FBI, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service to oppress people who they decide have the wrong nationality or wrong color of skin. We have internal refugees in the United States being cared for by churches in Vermont right now. Moreover, I feel flat out rotten that we are moving into a high-stakes testing era in public education that is going to be used to attack the basic public school structure of this country.

Sometimes I feel like yelling at my friends because I want more help. Sometimes I am insensitive because I am moving too fast, forgetting too much, rushing the process and because I get really, really tired.

The inner disciplines help a lot. Stress relief practices help a lot. Conversations with friends help a lot. Sunday worship helps a lot.

In addition, solidarity helps a whole lot. When I wear down on stopping the war in Iraq, I think of the Chaldean Christian Church in Baghdad that has finally finished a new building it is using for service to orphans and for other service purposes. They asked a church delegation to please tell President Bush not to bomb their new building and not to hurt the people they serve. I think about a handicapped preacher in the United States, who has struggled to continue his ministry, who spends his limited resources on health care. Charlie is very poor, is trying to support a child, and he need all the help from Medicaid and Medicare that he can get. I think of the children dying of malnutrition in El Salvador, children that overwhelm the limited resources of our friend Vicki Guzman. I think of President Bush refusing to spend \$34 million passed by Congress to help overseas with family planning, sexuality education, and in programs to stop the ritual mutilation of the genitals of young girls.

I am not part of winning many perishable wreaths, but I think the feelings of alignment and solidarity may just be one of those imperishable wreaths.

I am pleased with the many things Seekers is doing to run the race for justice and peace. I am particularly pleased that so many Seekers individually are at work in the interests of justice and that we are collectively taking on more peace work through Seekers Church Peace Witness. I love to tell my colleagues in Justice and Witness Ministries that my little church has a \$6000 line item in its budget for public policy advocacy. I am pleased about our work with Tumalong, not just the money and work, but the growing consciousness.

I am happy with what I know of our conversations about justice and peace in Seekers. They are fairly sophisticated and nuanced. We love the ideals of the United States, and many of the good things we do at home and abroad, while challenging all that is wrong. We are generally supportive of the many good aspects of the regulated capitalism in our economy, while being critical of the abuses, the consumerism and the greed that is all too common. We affirm the positive directions in our society towards greater fairness and inclusiveness across lines of race and gender and disability, while noticing how far we have to go.

I want something more for us, more doing for sure, but especially something more on the side of being, something more in the realm of the imperishable wreaths.

Part of this has to do with running to win and not merely because running is a good thing to do, good moral exercise, or good guilt relief. I want us to be dissatisfied with the slogan that it is good enough to be faithful. Being a good witness is about our good intentions, about expressing our faith. It does not care enough for others, and good will does not add up to mutuality, solidarity and friendship. Moreover, it does not take justice seriously enough.

Offering a good witness, and being of service, falls short of alignment and solidarity, and that is where the imperishable wreaths are hidden. This is not about caring more and trying harder, it is about caring more and trying harder because we feel connected and because it expresses who we are as Seekers Church.

It is not about whipping up our guilt. Nor is it about purging our hearts of selfishness or hate. Instead, it is about remembering how often we have to confess our collective guilt, to be anguished that the war in Iraq is being done in our name by the people we elect, to be anguished that the clothing we buy is often sewn by exploited women, our soccer balls sewn by exploited children. It is about consciousness, like buying high mileage cars to cut down on the use of oil, like paying attention to recycling, and like giving money to political candidates and working in their campaigns: not because they are pure, but because democracy actually does matter and because the powers and principalities can't buy the elections if we don't let them.

I want Seekers to know that is a Just Peace church. I love our mantra about being a church that is built on call, and that we respond to call with commitment to our inner journeys, our outer journey, and through building our beloved community. I equally want Seekers to be a church that is built on consciousness, and I want us to respond by shaping our inner journeys to become active peacemakers, active justice makers. I want us to shape our outer journeys not only because of our call, but because we are called out by the needs of others. I do not mean merely the need of others for help, but the need of others for respect and friendship and mutuality. The offer of charity and service reflects our generosity and our privilege. Engagement and alignment comes from a transformed heart. They require epiphanies. This requires taking up the cross and not just volunteering.

I am talking about recognitions that will help us to deeper

transformation as a beloved community. I am talking about knowing that we are on a journey together and not just meeting for worship and fellowship. I am talking about knowing that we meet the face of God in the world as much as we meet it in the church.

Let me follow just one of the points of my outrage for a moment. Hundreds of the prisoners we took in Afghanistan are being held incognito at our Guantanamo base in Cuba. Conditions are bad enough that we are beginning to hear leaked reports of increasing suicide attempts. President Bush, John Ashcroft and crew, are defying international law on the treatment of prisoners, and denying any semblance of judicial proceedings for the assertion that these are criminals rather than mere prisoners. It is the kind of story that breaks my heart, to think of these people being held and abused in my name, in our name.

I want to pause for a minute so that each of us can consider the things that are breaking our hearts. I know you care a lot. What is breaking your heart? What takes you from caring to outrage? What makes you want to be part of a community that knows it is fighting back? What makes you know that intercessory prayer is not so much a discipline as a necessity?

[Pause]

It is too easy to be jaded and overwhelmed when we hear that people are being tortured in the name of protecting our safety. I want to turn away from the knowledge that the United States sold or gave chemical weapons to Saddam Hussein when he was attacking the people in Iran.

When I get in touch with my outrage, I know that I am not giving in to covert despair. However, outrage is not good enough. Outrage wears you out. It is an emotional sprint and we need to run the good race every day. That takes love and I

do not mean sentimental good feeling.

Jesus wept because he looked at Jerusalem and knew that despite all the wonderful things about the temple and the city, that it did not know the things that make for peace. To walk with Jesus, to take up the cross, is to stand in that space and weep. It is to weep, and then to dry our eyes and walk back from Emmaus to Jerusalem. The end of the Emmaus story is not in the joy of seeing the Christ in the breaking of the bread. The bread is food for the journey, and the disciples left Emmaus and went back to Jerusalem, went back to danger and to promise.

We are running to win because life in this world does matter. We taste its preciousness. We worry about the limited futures of the young people in Bokomosa who brought us such lovely gifts. When we give of that same life, when we rearrange our weekends, we find ourselves coming together because we need each other, we find ourselves giving because it expresses all of who we are and not just our generosity. We meet each other in communion as much in agony as in ecstasy, and call for the risen Christ out of our felt need.

Then our work is not so much a matter of commitment and sacrifice, it is a sharing of love. That is salvation. Then we know our names. Then we have enough light for our next steps. Then there is no question of despair or alienation, only questions of engagement and the sharing of the joy of running.

As my Uncle Stan says, when people ask him if he has been saved, he says, "Well God knows whether I am saved. What I know is that I have been well spent."

We call ourselves Seekers and I do not think this name attracts us because we are passively sitting around and dithering about what to do. We are Seekers because we are out there scouting around for the best paths, for friends, for horizons and landmarks. We are Seekers because when you are on

the move you had better keep your eyes open and you had better share your stories because none of us can see everything.

Paul talks about running with discipline to win the imperishable wreath. Maybe you and I know what that is. Nothing in heaven or on earth can separate us from the love of God made known to us in Jesus the Christ, the love of God that is sufficient for all we face in life, even if, as it is for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, it means imprisonment and death for following the way of the cross.

I do not want any of you to volunteer for anything. Too many of you are tired and worn down. I just want us to stand together because we share God's love and know it in the sharing, because it is life itself to stand together. I want us to stand together because we can hold each other up, because together we can be the Body of Christ. We can show forth the living promise that is life eternal here and now. I want us to stand together so that we can correct each other without shouting. I want us to stand together because I need the presence of your body selves and not merely your intellectual assent or good will. Moreover, I want us to journey together because I love you and am eager to taste all the good things we can be and do together.